

Łukasz Barciński

A STUDY OF POSTMODERN LITERATURE IN TRANSLATION AS ILLUSTRATED
THROUGH THE SELECTED WORKS OF THOMAS PYNCHON

In the 1950s of the 20th century, in the post-war reality, on the American soil, a new convention has appeared on the literary horizon. Although there was neither a formulated manifesto of the convention nor a specified literary program, it was possible to discern the characteristic features of the novelty: emphasis on intertextuality, eclecticism, ludicity, parody, pastiche, departure from mimetism, logocentrism understood as the focus on the linguistic layer of the literary work, autothematism, metatextuality. One important aspect underlying this type of literary production was the assumption that literature reached the state of exhaustion, that everything had already been said or written and nothing original can be created. The only way to proceed with literary creation is to deconstruct the existing meanings and values (literary, aesthetic or philosophical ones) and transform them into elements of play with the reader.

This new literary convention has come to be called *postmodern* and, although currently the time when it received the bulk of critical attention has passed, it still remains an interesting subject of literary and translation studies mainly because of its experimental and radical character. The convention has created a new type of aesthetics, drastically departing from that of realist or mimetic fiction and forcing its readers to adjust the mode of reading to this specific type of literary creation.

This thesis attempts to determine whether there are some specific aspects of this convention that require different treatment from the point of view of translation theory; in other words, it endeavours to establish to what extent the specificity of postmodern works i.e. their experimental and radical character influences theoretical assumptions related to the present-day theory of literary translation as well as to the nature of translation in general. The subject of the analysis is the canon of postmodern works i.e. the novels by Thomas Pynchon in Polish translation. The choice of the subject seems to be substantiated by the fact that Pynchon is one of the leading figures of the convention and his works reveal virtually all characteristics of postmodern fiction.

This thesis falls into three major parts. Chapter 1 focuses on the existing theory linking the areas of translation and literature. In particular, it attempts to offer a definition of translation for the purpose of analysis of literary translation. It traces the mythical beginnings

of translation to the Tower of Babel and then proceeds to the description of dichotomies translation discourse is locked within. Then Chapter 1 presents translation theory as a series of turns which perpetuate in the discipline, showing the inherent binarity from various perspectives and stressing the role of interdisciplinarity in translation discourse. Subsequently, translation theory related to literary translation is presented along with the definition of literariness and key literary theories related to the postmodern literary convention.

Chapter 2 focuses on the presentation of the literary postmodern convention and its main characteristics along with the figure of Thomas Pynchon and the unique aspects of his works. Special emphasis is put on Deleuze and Guattari's concept of *rhizome* and the concept of *entropy* derived from information theory, which are later appropriated for the purpose of the interdisciplinary approach, which is the analytical tool applied in the practical analysis in Chapter 3. Additionally, Chapter 2 discusses the role of translative dominant in the translation process and offers several dominants applicable for the analysis of Pynchon's fiction.

These introductory chapters are followed by the analytical part of Chapter 3, which presents the practical analysis of major areas of sense production in Pynchon's works called *rhizomaticities*. The practical analysis focuses on the comparison of the level of defamiliarisation in ST and TT and the extent of application of the foreignising strategy. Pynchon's works, which are the subject of the analysis, are his four novels that have already been translated into Polish: *Gravity's Rainbow*, *Crying of Lot 49*, *Inherent Vice* and *Mason&Dixon*. The thesis ends with the conclusions drawn from the above analysis related to the specificity of the postmodern literary convention in translation.

The analysis of Pynchon's works utilises the rhizomatic *misreading* of his novels and compares the recreation of literary rhizomaticities, considering the mutually related multiple nourishing higher order forces of TT rhizome recreation such as the sacral dominant, intertextuality, heteroglossia, the ontological dominant, encyclopaedic and paranoiac reading according to the adherence to the foreignising strategy and the recreation of TT entropy. The analysis focuses also on special cases of literary translation i.e. puns, intertextuality, proper names, slang/dialect and culture-bound items. The conclusion of each sub-section includes the indication of the extent of the recreation of a given rhizomaticity along with the possible changes in the recreation of the ST defamiliarisation.

The analysis of the translation of Pynchon's novels (mainly *Gravity's Rainbow*, supplemented by examples from *Inherent Vice*, *Mason&Dixon* and *The Crying of Lot 49*) involves the major rhizomaticities (areas of sense dissemination) and a multitude of minor ones. The analytical tool chosen for the comparative analysis (drawn from the field of

information theory), i.e. the change of entropy, shows various intensity of foreignising within different rhizomaticities. Furthermore, the analysis takes into account other relevant dominants, whichever seems more revealing for a given rhizomaticity.

The analysis reveals that some rhizomaticities are barely recreated and the ST remainder is only fragmentarily released e.g. in case of <HETROGLOSSIA>, <SLANG> and <WORDPLAY>. In case of <NEOLOGISM>, <NAMES> and <ICONICITY> some pivotal rhizomemes do not seem to be recreated, although in some items the ST remainder seems to be released, recreating the original defamiliarising effect. In case of <ENCYCLOPAEDICITY>, <NARRATIVE>, <INTERTEXTUALITY>, <RELIGION>, <INTERFACE> and <MOVIE> in many instances TT recreates ST defamiliarisation to a great extent and the total entropy of the TT translation product seems to be as high as the ST entropy level, while still some rhizomatic deficiencies can be seen.

Regardless of the recreations perceived in the above analysis, it may be concluded that the TT defamiliarisation level in all of them remains lower than in the ST. The analysis reveals the general tendency in the translation of Pynchon's novels into Polish, which might be called the *plisir*-asation of the translated text, to paraphrase Barthes's term, i.e. the transformation of a readerly text into a writerly one, making it excessively intelligible and devoid of the original defamiliarisation and sense productive potential by rationalisation, conventionalisation and servile conformance to TL rules. Simultaneously, the analysis shows the infrequent application of the opposite tendency, which might be called *jouissance*-sation, i.e. making the TT equally (or more) defamiliarised as the ST and open to the sense production as envisioned by the Model Reader. *Plisir*-asation fails to recognise the experimental aspect of some literary works and the infinite interpretative process, which such experimentalism entails. Some literary works, which might be deemed rhizomatic, can be seen as sense productive structures that involve infinite permutations of meanings, a fact ignored in the overwhelming processes of unification and disambiguation of meaning. The works the modus operandi of which is defamiliarisation, if deprived of its effect, lose the footing, the premise according to which they are created (the ST remainder remains unreleased), while TT becomes mere denotative reproduction of the ST signifiers, cut off the original dense network of interrelated rhizomaticities. By removing the defamiliarising effect, the main pillar of the aesthetics is eliminated and the whole novel collapses, while readers are left with what smouldering rubble can be discerned in the ruin. In order to recreate the defamiliarisation effect it seems necessary to retain the entropy level according to the foreignising precepts: $\Delta S \leq 0$. These precepts seems to be applicable for the translation of Pynchon's works as their main message

appears to be the parody of intelligibility. The apparent trend in translation practice of postmodern works (illustrated by the example of Pynchon's works), *plisir*-ation seems to be the resultant of many various impulses, triggered by the entanglement of the TT in the rhizomaticity of the external world of the social, cultural and pragmatic factors (*texte general*).

One of the reasons for the apparent *plisir*-ation of postmodern literature might be the lack of a similar convention in the Polish literary environment, which might result from the fact that the postmodern literary convention was defined mainly on the American soil in the 1950s and 1960s. Polish critics in general are very sceptical about the application and functionality of the term *postmodern* in the Polish environment. The vagueness of the denotative scope of this term adds to the overall confusion about the proper comprehension of its application in the field of literature. It seems that, in the Polish reception, postmodernism (also in literature) often seems to be a synonym for blind nihilism, total lack of moral values or a passing pseudo-intellectual fad formed in the conditions of post-capitalist society, and thus deemed suspicious especially by conservative circles. As a consequence, the reception of postmodern experimentalism seems to be often seen only through the perspective of nihilistic all-inclusiveness (according to the postmodern credo *anything goes*), while ignoring the multitude of other possible facets of this term as applied to literary practice. Pynchon's works, considered as the canon of postmodern literature, cannot be apparently reduced to mere experimental non-selectiveness, which might be substantiated by the multitude of dominants discernible in his fiction. The failure to perceive a different mode of reading, which results from the writerly/*plisir* reading of a readerly/*jouissance* text (or possibly from the total dismissal of the very possibility of existence of the latter within the generally perceived literary aesthetics), which, in turn, might stem from the lack of postmodern canon in Poland (the lack of parallel aesthetics), seems to lead to the *plisir*-ation of translation practice.

Translation of postmodern literature seems to require a sufficient level of erudition from the translator, which may be manifested in the ethical obligation towards representing a foreign culture or in the general familiarity with the ST intertextuality and knowledge of literary tradition and canons. Postmodern texts, which operate to a great extent on intertextuality, seem to require a thorough knowledge of not only other cultural texts, ST refers to, but also critical reception, the relevant literary traditions, possible relations with the persona of the author, in other words, an extensive knowledge of transtextuality in Genette's sense. The obvious limitations of a translator, reduced to one individual perspective, seem only remedied by familiarisation with the vast body of critical reception (in Pynchon's case

called ‘Pyndustry’), but also by the involvement in the dense rhizomaticity of social systems in Luhmann’s sense, to comprehend a particular literary act with the largest possible erudition to render a literary text, undoubtedly intertwined in a myriad of transtextual correlations.

Another reason for the *plisir*-asation of translation practice in Poland might be cultural asymmetry between the English and the Polish language. The foreignising precepts of retaining defamiliarisation seem especially valid in relation to translations into English, the *lingua franca* of the modern world. However, if applied to translations into languages which do not play such a prominent role, the insistence on linguistic purity might be seen as a struggle for their survival and resistance to foreign contamination, which could finally lead in an indeterminate perspective to gradual absorption of the minor language. The emerging dilemma is between the preservation of minor identity versus the recreation of the aesthetic effect (identity versus aesthetics). This might be another reason for the *plisir*-asation of translation practice and the application of prescriptive approach, which above all favours well-formedness and determines the *plisir*-asation of habitus of translators operating under the patronage of publishing houses.

A literary work, because of its inherent uniqueness, seems to be subjected to many dominants (resulting from multiple interpretations) depending on the density of its rhizomaticity. The multiplicity seems to require often an interdisciplinary approach in order to more adequately construe a literary work. From this point of view, translation (especially of postmodern literature) can be seen as a plateau, an area of intensity where various fields intersect and intermingle. The appropriation of various discourses seems to be a constant tendency in the history of translation studies discourse with different areas of interest and focus (the turns of translation studies). Translation studies seem to be a discipline that thanks to the nourishment from other disciplines can thrive and prosper, which can be particularly seen in the case of the analysis of postmodern literature in translation.

An apt example might be the concept of *entropy* drawn from information theory used for the analysis in the present work. The appropriation of the concept of *entropy* and tracing the possible affiliations between other disciplines (literary theory – defamiliarisation, intertextuality, texts of *plisir* and *jouissance*; philosophy – dissemination, rhizome; psychoanalysis – language as consciousness; translation studies – foreignisation/domestication; linguistics) facilitates the creation of a valid analytical tool to analyse the complexities of postmodern literature in translation. Entropy, appropriated for the purposes of translation studies can be defined as the measure of recreated literariness expressed by means of the difference in ST and TT defamiliarisation within the analytical

framework based on philosophical concepts of rhizome and dissemination and can be of particular relevance for the analysis of the translation of highly experimental literary works.

Another example might be the application of the philosophical concept of *rhizome* introduced by Deleuze and Guattari (inscribable into the metaphorical traditions of the translation discourse), which can be a useful in the analysis of the translation product with reference to its sense productive potential. The introduction of the unit of translation analysis i.e. *rhizomeme* may be fruitful in the dynamic tracing of sense dissemination by highlighting that the signification process consists in the mutual relations of signs within the textual rhizomaticity.

The experimental aspect of postmodern works seems to set a challenge for translators related to the extent of recreation of such experimentality in TT. This challenge seems to involve many aspects, one of them being the active role of translators in the introduction of new linguistic items into TL. The intersection of cultures and languages, seen in the process of TT rendition often places translators in the avant garde of cross-linguistic permeability as the decision makers or the interface between languages allowing or disallowing the free linguistic influx of the foreign (within the continuous process of foreign borrowing). Translators may be thus seen as linguistic sappers or outposts in the linguistic war between languages, becoming easy targets for indiscriminate criticism unaware of the intricacies of the translation act. From this perspective, translation can be seen as an experimental linguistic practice, balancing on the thin line of linguistic enrichment and contamination. In the case of postmodern texts, it seems necessary for translators to take more risks to recreate the uniqueness of their literary convention or, in other words, to venture into the risks of Third Language creation, to dance on the rope with *slightly* unfettered legs. A proficient translator of a popular translation product might be deemed to influence the process of linguistic borrowing and given the high popularity of a particular translation, the translator might be an important agent in the introduction of new linguistic items into TL.

Another perspective on translators' work, which may give more insight in the *placir-*asation tendency, is the copyright law. The copyright law currently in force effectively discourages translators from undertaking linguistic risk, where none is welcome and could be seen as violation of the author's rights.

The uniqueness of every literary text makes it impossible to provide one universal formula for its translation or to find one universal dominant for its translation, especially in case of texts of *jouissance* including postmodern ones. Such *Janus faced texts* escape one unifying principle of interpretation and seemingly an infinite series of dominants can be

applied to their translation and analysis. Understandably, the present thesis applies only a few of them: the sacral dominant, the Lacanian dominant, the entropic dominant and all related to major analysed rhizomaticities. It may be also stated that the analytical focus applied in the present thesis can be also seen as a misreading of Pynchon's texts and other analyses might use a completely different set of dominants. Paradoxically, the possibility of other misreadings (proving that other dominants not chosen in the present work are more applicable) seems to corroborate the premises of the present analysis (the multiplicity of dominants), ultimately validating the *modus operandi* of Pynchon's works – the infinite multiplicity of interpretations as allowed by the text productivity. *Plasir*-isation of the translator's dominant might result from the failed mimetic realisation based on the realist convention that the words are chosen in the text only to imitate the reality out there and not to create endless chains of meaning, confusing, ambiguous to project a paranoid texture fit for a different mode of reading for readers looking for answers how to go on within the indeterminacy of a world of theirs and to construe the hieroglyphs of modern day life in the anticlimactic catharsis of postmodern fiction. In case of Pynchon, the interpretative act proceeds the same way a stargazer perceives a constellation – the configuration of each depends on one's position. From another solar system, a familiar grouping of stars would fall into different patterns. The permutation of sense productivity makes a literary work an interpretative fruit machine - each reading becomes a new arrangement of signification.

In Pynchon's case, the translator in this condition becomes a kind of creative erudite, whose task is to perform a paranoid reading of the text, appropriating a sacral-like attention to any detail on any level of the text's signification. Accordingly, the translator has to become not only Eco's Model Reader, but in this special case the Apophenic Reader – a reader with the compulsive tendency to perceive meaningful patterns between not related patterns or random things - in order to face Pynchon's works, the foolhardy gamble with the limits of fiction.

Foreignisation seems to be the strategy to follow in case of experimental literary works. By focus on minor variables, the entropy of the TT becomes higher and the level of literariness becomes recreated along with the ST rhizomaticities. However useful it might be in translation analysis, one text seems never to be subjected to translation only according to the foreignising strategy. Even in such works as Pynchon's, which exhaust the limits of literariness, domestication strategy seems to be partially applicable in <ENCYCLOPAEDICITY>. This fact might be seen as the confirmation of the inherent hybridity of all texts, depending on density of their rhizomaticity. In another foreignising

dilemma, in case of <NAMES>, the foreignising strategy faces an aporia – the unavoidable choice between the possible option of retaining ST referentiality or inserting TT characteronymy (every choice weakens the original impact of ambiguity of the arbitrary system of naming evoked in Pynchon’s novel).

Foreignisation seems to be also a useful strategy to recreate global textual shifts of defamiliarisation as a radical compensatory strategy operating within the totality of the aesthetic effect and not within limited one-to-one textual equivalence. It might be also useful in analysing the collateral rhizomaticities (the by-products of translation) that always occur in translation as a result of anisomorphism and in determining whether the collateral rhizomaticities do not become translation dystrophy, seriously distorting the ST remainder in TT.

Much after Babel, the translation practice have become more complex. The differentiation between written and oral language along with the origin of many genres and conventions and the recognition of literary aesthetics has made it more difficult to express Benjamin’s suprahistorical kinship of languages or unity of intention in translation. As a result of Triple Indeterminacy, it may be stated that it is not possible to have only one equivalent translation of a literary work. The text of translation of a literary work might be described by appropriating the concept of a variorum, a work, which collates all variants of a text, here applied to denote all the present and future translations, which might be created by recognising the infinite text productivity.

From the foreignising point of view, the infiniteness of text production taken too far might be seen as a threat to the ethics of difference and the obligation of ethical representation of other cultures. The limits offered by Triple Indeterminacy become often excessively strained by what Venuti calls *belletrisation* of translation practice i.e. making unsubstantiated choices in translation based on *unreflective impressionistic* aesthetic judgements and aggressive anti-intellectualism that discourages thinking about translation, ignoring the fact that translation is always an interpretative act. In such a perspective, the haunting dichotomies of today, pertaining to literary translation, might not be that of mere letter vs. sense or faithful vs. beautiful, but rather between ethical representation of a given culture and language within Triple Indeterminacy (the limits of the interpretation by the Apophenic Reader) and the unthinking belletrisation in the name of impressionist aesthetics, which is the direct consequence of translators’ inerudition. *Plasir*-asation of the translation practice might be seen as related to Venuti’s belletrisation, although focusing on one specific instance: on the

failure to recognise the mode of reading of a literary text in the name of more realistic/mimetic aesthetics, thus distorting its premises of defamiliarisation.

In conclusion, it may be stated that Pynchon's postmodern works pose an immense challenge to their translation. The specificity of postmodern literature seems to be best expressed by the precept that Pynchon's words must remain strange and wonderful, which gives justice to the logocentric and defamiliarising momentum within his works where even a rose by a different name smells not as sweet. Only by the erudition of translators, *de-plasir*-asation of translators' habitus and their truly mindful effort can readers fully appreciate the mindless pleasures of Pynchon's multifaceted fiction.